

FACT SHEET: FEDERAL EFFORTS TO SUPPORT HEALTH AND MEDICAL NEEDS FOR RESIDENTS AND RESPONDERS

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius outlined the federal government's efforts to support the health and medical needs of residents and responders impacted by the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill:

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in coordination with state and local health departments, is conducting surveillance across the 5 Gulf States for health effects related to the oil spill using established national surveillance systems, including the National Poison Data System (NPDS) and BioSense to track respiratory, vascular, and dermal issues. CDC Surveillance efforts have detected some complaints of throat irritation, eye irritation, nausea, headache, and cough; these nonspecific symptoms could be attributable to a number of conditions. The CDC continues to work with state and local partners to monitor and quickly investigate any possible health effects.

HHS has activated the National Disaster Medical System as a precaution should Gulf States need additional medical support as a result of the oil spill. An HHS mobile medical unit will arrive in Louisiana on Tuesday. The medical unit will be staffed by an HHS medical team comprised of a doctor, two nurses, two emergency medical technician-paramedics (EMT-P) and a pharmacist. This unit will be supporting the local medical community by triaging responders and community members who are concerned about health effects of the oil spill. Patients who require medical attention beyond the basic care available through the mobile unit will be referred to local healthcare providers and hospitals.

The Food and Drug Administration is closely monitoring the developing situation in the Gulf Coast region to help ensure that seafood potentially impacted by the oil spill is not making its way into commerce. FDA scientists are working with experts at NOAA's National Seafood Inspection Laboratory in Pascagoula, Miss., on methods to test fish, crabs, shrimp, and oysters, for harmful oil residues. One of FDA's mobile labs is deployed to the Gulf Coast and will be used to conduct prescreening analysis of seafood samples being evaluated to determine if waters closed to fishing and shellfish harvesting can be re-opened.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is currently in contact with disaster behavioral health personnel in each of the impacted states offering technical assistance as they assess the needs of the area's populations. SAMHSA response activities include conducting needs assessments, communicating with leadership, providing assistance and serving as a liaison with external constituents. SAMHSA is prepared to work with States and communities as they provide programs, services, and consultation to mitigate the behavioral health impact and restore the Gulf Coast.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) is monitoring workers involved in the clean-up effort: identifying job duties and locations, training, and making recommendations on the capabilities of personal protective equipment. NIOSH has visited Response Staging Areas and BP Training Facilities located in four states (LA, AL, MS, FL), and is providing guidance to federal and state partners on how to protect volunteers from potential safety and health hazards. Nearly 3000 responders have been rostered, and efforts continue to increase this participation.

The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), is providing training and safety information to protect the health of responders. The NIEHS Worker Education and Training Program created a 4-hour educational course on hazard awareness and safety, which is required for all oil spill workers hired by BP. A pocket handbook “Safety and Health Awareness for Oil Spill Cleanup Workers” has been printed in English, Spanish and Vietnamese, and distributed throughout five Gulf Coast states to front-line responders in the BP Vessels Of Opportunity program, and beach workers in the Shoreline Cleanup Assessment Team. All educational resources are available at www.niehs.nih.gov. NIEHS will use its remaining stimulus grant money from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to fund research on the potential human health effects of the oil spill.

On May 28 Secretary Sebelius sent a letter to Lamar McKay, Chairman and President of BP America, expressing concern about the impact of this oil spill on public health in the Gulf region. In the letter, she informed Mr. McKay that BP will be expected to accept its clear responsibility for the health consequences of the oil spill and asked the company to pay for the costs of health care and monitoring.